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Memorandum

TO: HONORABLE MAYOR AND
CITY COUNCIL

FROM: Jeffrey L. Clet
Leslye Corsiglia
Sara Hensley

SUBJECT: 877 WILLOW STREET FIRE,
MARCH 23, 2005

DATE: May 19, 2005

Approved

Date

May 19, 2005

Council District: 6

INFORMATION

On March 23, 2005, the San Jose Fire Department responded to a six-alarm fire at 877 Willow Street in San Jose, a thirty-year-old apartment building with 84 units. Seventy-five firefighters fought the blaze with mutual aid from the City of Santa Clara. There were 243 residents displaced by the fire, with one resident transported to the Valley Medical Center for treatment of burns to his hands and face, and two others treated at the scene for minor injuries and released. Several Firefighters suffered minor injuries during the firefighting operation as well.

Fire Rescue and EMS Operations

The first Fire Department company arrived on scene at 5:14 a.m., and immediately called a second alarm. Initial units were hampered by poor access, and focused efforts on evacuating the residents. In addition, arriving Firefighters were met with three injured occupants who were injured during the fire. All three patients were suffering from significant smoke inhalation and one person had burns to his hands and face. The patients were treated by Firefighters and AMR on the scene and the burn victim was then transported to Valley Medical Burn Center. All three people are expected to fully recover from their injuries.

As the fire spread from the apartment of origin on the third floor into the hallway and attic areas, third and fourth alarms were requested, including one mutual aid alarm from the City of Santa Clara. The fire extended into several units on the third floor, primarily due to open hallway fire doors and apartment doors. Fire companies were forced to stretch hose lines from the street, up the stairwells and into the hallways to attack the fire, due to lack of a built-in water system. The 200' long hallway acted like a horizontal chimney, making access to the fire area dangerous and difficult. Fire Truck Companies were also effective in cutting ventilation holes in the roof to allow some of the hot fire gases to escape through the roof which then aids in the safety for evacuating residents and reduces horizontal fire spread. Despite the enormous effort the fire burned down through the second and into the first floor, but was for the most part contained to

single rooms on those floors. Eventually, a fifth and sixth alarm of SJFD units were called to provide relief for the exhausted personnel on scene.

Additional Mutual-Aid fire companies from the City of Milpitas were requested to backfill vacated San Jose Fire Stations. This system of backfill is a result of mutual-aid changes implemented after the Santana Row fires. This change has considerably increased the local agencies ability to send the nearest resources when needed without leaving the rest of the community with inadequate emergency resources. Additional Mutual-Aid County Overhead Command Team personnel responded to provide incident command support. San Jose Police Department provided traffic control as well as helping with the coordination of the displaced residents. PG&E was called early on in the incident to secure the power to the building to eliminate the potential for electrocution hazards for firefighters working on the scene. The fire was placed under control at 10:19 a.m.; however, fire department resources remained on the scene throughout the day.

The fact that there were no major injuries to firefighters or civilians during this operation is extraordinary. In addition, given the time of day and the fact that most residents were asleep at the time of the fire and that they were evacuated without any major injuries or deaths serves as a testament of the exceptional efforts by Firefighters that responded that day.

Asbestos Exposure

On March 26, the Department was informed that asbestos was present in the structure. As a result, department personnel were directed to follow approved protocols for personal equipment de-contamination and all department personnel that were potentially exposed to the asbestos hazard completed personal exposure forms.

Fire Investigation

The San Jose Arson Unit was called back to determine the fire cause and was assisted in the days following the fire by the Santa Clara County Arson Task Force. At this time, the fire is still under investigation and the cause has not been determined. In addition, fire investigators were told by witnesses that the manual alarm was not working, they are continuing to research this as well and their findings will be included in the final investigation report.

Property Damage

All three floors and several units were damaged in the fire area in the east-wing of the building by the fire itself, but the effects of the smoke, water, and firefighting activities made the entire building uninhabitable. It is estimated that the damage will be in the several million dollars. However, the department continues to work with the private insurance company to determine a more accurate fire loss amount. In addition, it appears that most of the occupants did not have personal property insurance. Although we are attempting to include an estimate of personal property or contents loss as well, it will be difficult to determine an accurate amount.

Fire Protection Systems

The building was constructed in compliance with the codes in effect at the time. Fire protection systems in place included a manual pull fire alarm; battery-powered smoke detectors in the individual units, a Class II standpipe system (hose line, not for fire department use), and fire doors mid-way down the corridors in the east wing. The apartment complex was sold approximately eight months ago for \$9.5 million. The owner indicated that there were working smoke detectors in every unit at the time of purchase, and that they have a procedure in place to ensure that the smoke detectors were well maintained in all units.

Arson investigators were told by witnesses that the manual alarm was not working, and they are continuing to research this. At this time we are attempting to determine if the required annual test had been completed on the alarm system.

The self-closing fire door on the fire floor (third floor) was propped open which is not allowed under the fire code. The Arson Investigators determined that this was a major cause of rapid fire spread, heat and smoke spread throughout the structure, dramatically increasing the danger to the evacuating occupants as well as causing additional property damage. In addition, the individual unit doors, which exited into the hallway, were not self-closing, and several were left open when the occupants evacuated the building, also contributing to fire spread.

Inspections

The California Fire Code requires annual fire inspections of apartment buildings. In San Jose, line fire companies are responsible for inspecting apartment buildings including the fire building. Department inspection records indicate that the most recent inspection occurred in 2004. Although the fire company on the initial inspection noted a few fire code violations, all violations were subsequently corrected on their follow-up inspection.

In addition, San Jose Code Enforcement inspects apartments once every six years and their records indicate that an inspection of this property occurred in 2001. At that time they found one smoke detector missing, and several needing batteries, but indicated those had all been corrected by December 2001.

Assistance to Displaced Residents

Early on the morning of the fire, the Red Cross arrived on the scene to offer assistance to the displaced residents. Housing Department staff also responded to the scene to provide reassurance to fire evacuees and information about assistance that would be made available to them from the City. The department contacted VTA to provide buses to assist with on-site temporary shelter and transportation. A local Baha'i Faith Church representative offered temporary shelter at their Church located at 945 Willow Street. The Red Cross utilized the VTA buses to transport the displaced occupants to the church site while planning for a more permanent location. Once the full extent of the displacement was known, the Red Cross set up

an overnight shelter at the Willow Glen Middle School. Councilmember Yeager along with Fire Chief Clet met with Red Cross Representatives and displaced tenants at the Willow Glen Middle School site to offer assistance from the City and offered the use of Fire Station 6 (Willow Glen) to be used as a collection point for community members who wanted to offer assistance in the form of clothes, food, toys and blankets for the apartment tenants who had suffered losses.

At 9:00 a.m. on Thursday, March 24, 2005, the City's Homeless Coordinator along with Fire Department representatives attended an emergency meeting at the apartment building. Housing staff coordinated with the Fire Department and Red Cross volunteers to inform displaced families of available services. Housing staff coordinated with the Fire Department and apartment representatives to allow residents access back into their units to retrieve clothing and emergency supplies.

By early in the afternoon of March 24, the Red Cross set up an Emergency Service Center at the Willows Senior Center and another informational meeting was convened. Staff from the Housing Services Partnership (HSP), the consortium of agencies contracted by the City to provide homeless prevention and emergency housing services (EHC LifeBuilders, InnVision and Sacred Heart Community Service), were present and assisted families with housing referrals and financial assistance. The Tri-County Apartment Association and the Housing Authority of Santa Clara County offered assistance in locating apartments and the Housing Authority also made available a list of developments with vacant affordable units. Rents at the Glen Willow Apartment complex range from \$875.00 for the one-bedroom units to \$1,050 for the two bedroom apartments, and many resident families will be eligible for placement in affordable housing.

The Housing Department directed HSP staff to be present during all hours of operations at the Emergency Service Center, including Saturday and Sunday. HSP staff was instructed to assist all families seeking financial assistance in a timely manner. The financial assistance provided by HSP to date ranges from \$400 to \$1,500 per family, with a current total of over \$23,000. In addition, the Red Cross provided each family with a debit card with an average of \$300 to assist in the purchase of immediate personal items.

Starting on Thursday March 24th, and continuing for four days, Parks, Recreation and Neighborhood Services provided assistance by recreation leaders through the Mobile Recreation Program. The program offered recreational activities to the children of the displaced families for several hours each day, and all day on Saturday. PRNS also coordinated the use of the Willows Senior Center by the Red Cross, including 24-hour access to a classroom; the use of phones, photocopier and fax machine; and assistance of Senior Center staff as needed.

All of the evacuated families were referred to the HSP for housing assistance and were provided with clothing vouchers from the Salvation Army, as well as food vouchers from Sacred Heart Community Service. As of April 20th, fifty families had been successfully assisted in securing new permanent housing.

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One of the families displaced by the Willow Street fire included a pregnant woman (9 months), her husband, and their four children. HSP offered the family an emergency unit at the Boccardo Reception Center and that night the woman delivered her child at Valley Medical Center. With the assistance of a City rental deposit guarantee, the HSP staff was able relocate the family into a new permanent home with no cash payment requirement.

The City's Homeless Services staff will continue to work with the Fire Department, Red Cross, HSP and the displaced families until all have been relocated to new permanent homes. Fire staff continues to work with the Greenspan Insurance Company to help facilitate access for residents still waiting to claim their belongings.

Post-Incident Community Outreach

Post incident community outreach efforts consisted of collaboration between City's Housing Department and Fire Department and the American Red Cross, Councilmember Yeager's Office and the Greenspan Insurance Company.

Concerns were raised over reported asbestos in the building and an Environmental Hygienist from the Greenspan Insurance Company conducted eight air samples at the site after the fire. Seven of the samples registered fifteen fibers per millimeter squared, well below the OSHA standard of seventy fibers for continuous occupancy. One area measured approximately 100 fibers per millimeter squared. A second test was conducted two days later, and all measurable asbestos levels were below the OSHA standard.

On March 31, 2005, the Fire Department, the American Red Cross, and the American Lung Association collaborated in a community meeting at the Red Cross shelter at Willow Glen Middle School. This community forum educated the displaced residents about the risks associated with asbestos and discussed the early results released by the Industrial Hygienist regarding air samples taken at the Glen Willow Apartments.

On Saturday, April 9, 2005, the American Red Cross in collaboration with the Fire Department held a Fire Safety Forum/Community Education workshop for the Willow Street fire victims to help residents prevent and prepare for apartment fires. A Spanish translator was also provided to assist with the class curriculum. The Fire Department Public Education Training Specialist along with Engine Company 6 (Willow Glen Fire Station) were available to provide assistance with the class.

Community Petition

On April 26, 2005, a petition signed by almost 200 Willow Glen residents who are neighbors to the Glen Willow Apartments was delivered to the Fire Department and to Councilmember Yeager's office. The petition requests that the City require a higher level of fire protection at the Glen Willow Apartments when the building is reconstructed. The Fire Department is currently


working with Councilmember Yeager's office to provide a follow-up response to the signed petition.

Reconstruction

The Fire Marshal and the City Building Official have held a preliminary meeting to determine what will be required relative to fire and life safety protection systems under the current code when the apartment is rebuilt. As a result of this fire as well as a similar fire that occurred recently in January in Council District 7. The Fire Department, Fire Prevention Bureau has been directed to identify life safety systems that could be installed retroactively that would increase occupant safety in the event of fire in similar apartment buildings. Once the research is completed, the Fire Department intends to develop a Fire and Life Safety Ordinance for City Council consideration that would improve fire and life safety for occupants in older apartment buildings with life-safety hazards similar to the conditions present at the recent apartment fires.

Coordination

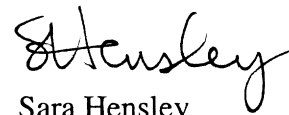
This extraordinary incident highlights the City's collaborative Multi-Departmental, Cross-CSA team approach that allows us to continue to provide a high level of customer service despite recent resource reductions. This report was coordinated by a Multi-Departmental, Cross-CSA team representing four Departments and two CSA's including; the Departments of Planning, Building and Code Enforcement, Parks, Recreation and Neighborhood Services, Housing and the Fire Department located in the Public Safety, Economic and Neighborhood Development City Service Areas.



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